DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 243 110 CS 208 229

AUTHOR Palumbo, Roberta M.
TITLE Professional Writing for the Liberal Arts Student: An Untapped Resource.
PUB DATE Apr 84
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Regional Meeting of the American Business Communication Association (Hammond, LA, April 5-7, 1984).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Business Communication; Business Correspondence; Course Descriptions; *Education Work Relationship; Higher Education; *Liberal Arts; Majors (Students); *Rhetoric; Teaching Methods; *Technical Writing; Writing Exercises; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Discourse Modes

ABSTRACT

A professional writing course can help liberal arts students draw upon their knowledge of language, psychology, sociology, history, and humanities to develop marketable expertise. A west coast college's advanced writing class links liberal arts education and professional training in composition. Rather than emphasizing form, the course focuses on rhetorical contexts: (1) informing, (2) requesting, (3) evaluating, (4) complaining, (5) recommending, (6) rejecting or denying, and (7) tracing progress. Using these contexts, it presents individual cases to students, who then respond appropriately in writing. The situations described in the cases give the students a sense of the audience and the particulars of the message. Most important to this method of teaching professional writing are the rhetorical strategies the students learn and subsequently apply to new contexts. The firm rhetorical base of the professional writing course makes it more than technical writing instruction and therefore an appealing elective for liberal arts students. (A sample case is included.) (HTH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Roberta M. Palumbo

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Palumbo
3500 Mt. Blvd.
Oakland, CA.
94619

ED243110

PROFESSIONAL WRITING FOR THE LIBERAL ARTS STUDENT: AN UNTAPPED RESOURCE

by

Roberta M. Palumbo

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"Liberal Arts students face the bleakest job prospects" of all 1983 college graduates (Time, June 6, 1983). However, study after study has shown that communication skills are highly prized by employers in business, government, industry, law, health care, education, and science. Ironically, by virtue of their courses in Language Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences liberal arts graduates have the greatest potential to be effective communicators--in person and on paper. How can this potential be realized?

Drawing upon their knowledge of language, psychology, sociology, history, etc., a course in professional writing can help these students focus their backgrounds into marketable expertise. The liberal arts graduate is an untapped resource; professional writing can help transform this seemingly jobless graduate of the American educational system into a productive member of the modern world of work where communication skills are so important. In my presentation today, I would like to demonstrate how such a course can be made attractive to liberal arts students. I will do this primarily by describing the methods and materials I have

CS 208 229

developed during the past five years of teaching professional writing to such students.

Basic to my whole approach is this axiom: professional writing is not following compositional formulas but meeting rhetorical challenges. The basic paradigm of professional communication (writer-message-audience), therefore, is seen by these students not as technical jargon but as an approach to human communication that utilizes their wide range of analytical skills. What is appealing about this approach, what attracts liberal arts students to such a course, is that the paradigm furthers students' understanding of human interaction. Certainly, students in psychology, sociology, English, history, speech pathology, etc. can see such study only as an extension of their own chosen discipline. Professional writing, therefore, is not a crutch with which their discipline, crippled by shifts in employment opportunities, can struggle in the career race, but rather an organic part of their education, which has taught them to be "thinking" individuals. Professional writing teachers may see these liberal arts students as an untapped resource--students in the classroom--but, in turn, the liberal arts students also see professional writing as an untapped resource, a meaningful part of their total education.

Believing that writing instruction beyond the basics of composition is an integral part of a liberal education but realizing that students are increasingly turning to career-oriented electives which will help them secure employment upon

graduation, I developed an advanced writing class that would link liberal arts education and professional training. The challenge was how to establish a curriculum that would serve the interests of a variety of liberal arts majors entering a variety of professions. My first class had students in art, music, speech, English, business, psychology, and sociology.

Textbooks on technical or business writing were helpful in introducing me to the types of writing my students would use in their careers, but the assignments and examples in these books would not have been useful to them. Only a few were entering the business world and none were entering a technical field or wished to be technical writers. In fact, I have discovered that liberal arts students often are put off by advanced writing courses called business communication or technical writing. They do not see how such courses relate to what they are interested in or have been studying for several years. I have titled my course, therefore, professional writing to differentiate its content from the specific orientation of business and technical fields and also to appeal semantically to the liberal arts student.

Why would someone majoring in English or psychology be interested in the table of contents of this newly published text. It includes chapters on "Orders and Replies to Orders," "Adjustment Letters," "The Credit Process," "Payments and the Collection Process," "Sales Letters," and "Goodwill Letters." Such an approach to career-oriented writing is not terribly

appealing to someone who can compare and contrast Jung and Freud or who has spent hours reading the works of Shakespeare. Now this doesn't mean that the skills basic to these kinds of writing situations would not be an important part of a liberal education; it just means that the context for the development of these skills is not appealing to liberal arts students and does not seem to relate to what they hope to do in the world of work. From business and technical writing texts, therefore, I did select the forms of communication I would teach my students--memos, letters, proposals, reports, and resumes--but I developed a set of contexts that dealt not only with business or technical topics.

What I established were broad contexts of communication with the prime emphasis being on managerial skills, since most liberal arts students will deal neither with technical information directly nor with business communication exclusively. Because I could not rely on typical contexts of business communication, the ones I just cited from the business text, I had to develop cases for my students to respond to, hypothetical situations including the problem to be addressed, names and positions of those involved, complicating factors.

The following is a sample of the contexts for professional writing I have developed to help give liberal arts students from a variety of disciplines some basic understanding of the communication skills needed in a variety of careers:

1. Informing

   Emphasis: ways to organize information (from statistical data to concepts).

2. Requesting

   Emphasis: strategies to establish good will and cooperation between sender and receiver of message.

3. Evaluating

   Emphasis: techniques of balancing commendations and recommendations.

4. Complaining

   Emphasis: approaches to establishing the rightness of the writer's position and getting receiver to respond with appropriate action.

5. Recommending

   Emphasis: skill in analyzing a problem and setting forth a plan of action.

6. Rejecting/Denying

   Emphasis: strategies to say no politely, firmly, and with good reasons.

7. Tracing Progress

   Emphasis: ways to establish goals and evaluate progress in meeting them.

Certainly, there are other contexts one might establish that would be equally useful. These are simply suggestions of ways to organize a course in professional writing. Unlike the

approach used in so many business communication texts, this paradigm emphasizes rhetorical contexts not forms, such as the memo, letter, or report. For each of the contexts discussed above, a student might write in any one of the tradition modes of business communication. In fact I do spend some time, but not a great deal, showing the standard formats and creative approaches to these modes. These modes, however, change from organization to organization and from decade to decade. Formats change but basic patterns of human communication do not. That is why I emphasize rhetorical contexts not prescriptive modes.

To prepare the students for the challenge of thinking rhetorically, I spend a good deal of time in the course discussing and providing exercises to demonstrate the "transaction" that is basic to the communication process, the interaction of writer, message, and audience. Students are encouraged to remember that, in whatever the context, writers must determine their persona, establish their purpose, and understand their audience. For example, to help them understand the concept of audience, I have them write the same message to two different audiences, one hostile and the other friendly.

Having established contexts for communication the next step was to develop cases representing the worlds of government, industry, law, health care, business, education, law, and science. Here is an example of one of the cases I

developed which gives the students practice in rejecting or denying something politely, firmly, and with good reasons. The situation described in the case gives the students a sense of audience and the particulars of the message, but most important to this method of teaching professional writing is the rhetorical strategies for rejecting or denying that the students learn from working with the case. The rhetorical skills are what will be remembered and then applied in new contexts.

Case

You have just started working in the county health agency as a trainee. You will spend some time in the various departments of the agency, learning the policies and procedures for each. Your first assignment is in the inspection department where your job is to visit various restaurants to see if they are complying with the health code. In each instance you must inform the eating establishment in writing of any violations. Most of the restaurants you visit are not in violation in any way, but Millie's Inn, you discover, has some serious problems. In your notebook you list these infractions:

1. Gargage overflowing in the alley
2. Women's restroom--no hot water
3. Smoking in kitchen--especially head cook
4. Unrefrigerated cooked food lying on counters
5. No recepticle for dirty towels in restrooms
6. Kitchen help handle food, don't use utensils

7. Men's restroom--no soap
8. Utensils put away dirty
9. Rat droppings in storeroom near flour
10. Kitchen help with long hair not wearing nets
11. Hot food kept below safe temperature

Your job is to inform the restaurant of these violations. The health code states that restaurants in such violation of the health code must be closed within three days and stay closed until another inspection determines that all violations are remedied. Write a letter to the owner of Millie's Inn, Mildred Thompson. Address: 3366 Sage Way, Brownmill, Oregon.

Here is a letter one of my students wrote for this case.

November 10, 1983

Mildred Thompson
Millie's Inn
3366 Sage Way
Brownmill, Oregon

Dear Ms. Thompson:
As you know, the Health Agency of Oregon conducts periodic inspections of eating establishments. These inspections are designed to protect the health and welfare of the public and to inform owners and managers to health code violations.

Upon inspecting your premises on November 14, 1983, I found

numerous violations of the local and state health laws. These violations are as follows:

Restrooms

1. No hot water in women's restroom
2. No soap in men's restroom
3. Dirty towels on floor--both restrooms

Food Storage

1. Cooked food unrefrigerated
2. Heating units below safe termperature

Employees

1. Not using hairnets
2. Handling of food with hands
3. Smoking in the kitchen

Cleanliness

1. Evidence of rats in storeroom
2. Dirty utensils in drawers
3. Garbage piled up in alley

I am sure you take the welfare of your patrons seriously and will act promptly to rectify the above mentioned violations. However, the nature and number of violations necessitate the mandatory closure of your restaurant in three days, on November 17, 1983. The restaurant will remain closed to the public until all violations have been remedied and a follow-up

inspection of the premises verifies this.

While we regret having to take this action, Ms. Thompson, each of these violations represents a serious health threat to your customers. It is with their welfare in mind that we are forced to close Millie's Inn.

When all of the violations listed above have been remedied, please contact this office to schedule a follow up inspection. If you have any questions please contact me; I would be most happy to discuss any aspects of the case with you.

Sincerely yours,

Mr. Ed Knut

The firm rhetorical base of the professional writing course I have outlined certainly makes it more than technical training and therefore an appealing elective for liberal arts students. In the tradition of liberal arts education, students are still asked to think analytically, evaluate diverse materials, and present ideas and information with clarity and grace. In this respect, such a professional writing course can be a vital resource for both departments of business or technical communication who wish to have a greater impact on the collegicate curriculum and for students of sociology, art, English, history, psychology, speech, etc. who are looking for some way to make their education meaningful to themselves and viable in the job market.